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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that investigated the number and relative strength of stressors and enhancers of marital and family life for public school superintendents in Wisconsin. A survey mailed to all 410 Wisconsin superintendents elicited 278 responses, a 68 percent response rate. Overall, the superintendents were more likely to report enhancers over stressors. They identified the development of communication and problem-solving skills and greater appreciation of family as the predominant enhancers in their family/marital lives. Most respondents identified the time- and energy-consuming nature of school administration as the greatest stressor. School district size, location (rural or urban), and income level had no significant impact on the level of stressors and enhancers. Ph.D. holders rated the lowest number of stressors and the highest number of enhancers; the opposite held true for superintendents with high school and bachelors' degrees. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY AND THE EFFECTS ON FAMILY LIFE

ED 392 162

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A preliminary study which investigates the number and relative strength of stressors and enhancers of marital and family life for public school superintendents in Wisconsin.

While there is growing concern regarding the status of the family, very little research concerning school administrators and their family relationship is available. Perhaps one reason for the lack of data is that school administrators often do not discuss their own family situations. Another reason may be the fact school administrators must deal with so many diverse family situations, they often do not focus on their own family. Research evidence in other fields indicates that people with healthy family relationships are able to bring more positive change to their area of responsibility (Garfield and Bergin, 1978). Another factor to consider is that being a school administrator may enhance marital and family life. The authors conducted an indepth research analysis of literature and found no studies relevant to this topic. Therefore, little is known about healthful and stressful behaviors in the family life of school administrators. The present study is a preliminary attempt to identify the strengths of enhancers and stressors of marital and family life of school administrators (superintendents) in the State of Wisconsin.

METHODS

Subjects:

The sample in this survey is comprised of 278 school district administrators (superintendents) throughout the State of Wisconsin which is approximately 68 percent of the total number of school administrators in the state.

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The respondents' ages range from 32 to 70 years with the majority 83.5 percent of the respondents ranging from 40 to 59 years of age. Males comprised 94.6 percent of the sample, females accounted for 3.9 percent of the population, and .7 respondents gave no answer to this question in the sample. Of those school administrators who responded, 90.4% of the sample had been married 11-40 years with the majority falling within the 21 to 30 year category. Those superintendents who responded, 93.1% have 0-5 children with the majority falling within the 3-5 children category. The majority of superintendents who were married indicated their spouses had a college education with 34.9% holding bachelors degrees and 18.7% holding masters degrees. Most superintendents stated they work 51-60 hours a week (49.5%) and come from rural districts (78.8%), and the majority of the respondents, 79%, had an income between $41,000 - $60,000.

Instrumentation:

For the purpose of this study, two questions were utilized from a survey instrument developed by Joseph I. Wetchler and Fred P. Piercy from Purdue University. This instrument divided the question in two categories--stressors and enhancers. The first question asked school district administrators, "How has being a district administrator uniquely strengthened your own marriage and family?" The second question asked, " How has being a district administrator been uniquely stressful in your marriage and family?" Check and rank instructions were added to provide quantitative and qualitative data for each of these items. The respondents were asked to check those items which applied to their family situation and rank them in terms of their relative strength.

Procedures:

All surveys (n = 410) were mailed out and the completed forms (n = 278) were returned representing 68% of the total. The survey was not entirely anonymous since some school administrators did sign their names to the survey. However respondents were assured that the survey responses would be analyzed and presented as group data and that confidentiality would be maintained.

Results:

The percent of respondents checking each stressor of the marital/family life survey are represented in Table 1. The data indicates that the stressors ranked most often were "little time left for family/marriage" and "difficulty in listening to the problems of own spouse\family".

Table 1
Stressors of Family/Marital Life

Statement	Rated by %
Little time left for own marriage/family	81.7%
Difficulty listening to problems of own spouse/family	63.9%
Little energy left for own marriage	56.3%
Difficulty switching roles from School District Administrator to family member	45.2%
Personal development beyond that of own spouse/family	31.7%
Unwilling to acknowledge own marital/family problems	24.2%
Setting unrealistic standards for own marriage/family	21.4%
Other	14.3%
Being with educator often is more rewarding than being with own spouse/family	11.5%
Spouse's family members' suspicion of being manipulated by me	8.7%
My spouse/family puts down my role as school district administrator	8.3%
Tendency to look for marriage/family problems that do not exist	5.2%

Table 2 indicates data regarding frequency and rankings of enhancers of marriage and family life of school administrators. The most frequently checked enhancers include "development of problem solving skills", "greater appreciation of own marital/family strengths", and "development of communication skills".

Table 2
Enhancers of Family/Marital Life

Statement	Rated by %
Development of problem solving skills	78.2%
Greater appreciation of own marital/family strengths	66.3%
Development of communication skills	61.3%
Awareness of normal life cycle problems	54.4%
Development of parenting skills	5.2%
Greater ability to prevent potential family problems	41.0%
Acceptance of own part in marital/family problems	33.3%
Greater acceptance of spouse's/family's problems	29.1%
Increased interaction with my family of origin	24.5%
Ability to disengage from family-of-origin situations	10.0%
Greater understanding of sex roles/issues in my own marriage/family	8.0%
Other	8.0%

By analyzing Tables 1 and 2, the data indicates respondents checked significantly more enhancers than stressors. In fact the school administrators perceived their jobs to be more enhancing than stressful. There were 939 ratings of stressors and 1199 ratings of enhancers. Thus, enhancers were rated 28 percent more often than stressors. Stressors and enhancers were also examined in terms of geographical setting, gender, marital status, years of marriage, number of children, number of hours worked per week, and income.

The survey indicates there is no significant differences found between urban vs. rural superintendents or male vs. female respondents. The data provided also shows no evidence of differences between income, the number of children, and years of marriage. However, when the group was analyzed according to marital status, spousal education, and hours worked, the data indicated some differences.

Marital status was divided into four categories--single, divorced, married, and widowed. Overall the married and widowed group showed more enhances than stressors. However, the non-married group particularly the divorced groups (100%) indicated a higher stress rate especially in question #3, "Difficulty listening to problems of own spouse/family." Keep in mind, however, the non-married group (single, divorced, widowed) is a small representation of the group (11 respondents). The married superintendents were more likely to check the enhancer #6, "Greater appreciation of own marital/family strengths," (67% vs. 40%) and enhancer #3, "Development of communication skills" (62% vs. 40%) than non-married respondents.

When the spouses were grouped according to educational background, the data indicates all groups rated enhancers higher than stressors with the Ph.D. spouses indicating the least level of stress (2.2%) and the highest level of enhancers was in the Masters group (5.1%).

The most frequently checked stressor among all groups was #2, Little time left for own marriage/family" (82%). The Ph.D. spouse group indicated question #2 as being least stressful (67%) compared to the high school diploma spouse group (91%).

Of the enhancers, the group as a whole checked #5, "Development of problem solving skills" as the most beneficial to marriage and family (79%) with the Masters group identifying this item as the most enhancing to their family/marriage relationship (85%).

School administrators were grouped according to hours worked per week as follows: less than 40 hours, 41-50 hours, 51-60 hours, more than 60 hours. The majority of respondents (86.3%) indicated they worked from 41-60 hours a week. Those administrators (24%) working 41-60 hours a week identified more enhancers than stressors. The most frequently checked stressor was #2, "Little time left for own marriage/family (79.9%), and most frequently checked enhancer was #5, "Development of problem solving skills" (70.5%). The overall data reveals that the percentage of enhancers over stressors decreases as the hours worked per week increases. The data also revealed that those administrators working less than 40 hours a week rated stressor #3, "Difficulty listening to problems of own spouse/family," unusually high.

DISCUSSION

The most significant finding of this study is the fact that school administrators were more likely to identify enhancers (1199) over stressors (939) in relation to their job and family relationships. In analyzing data for the entire group of school administrators surveyed, the enhancers and stressors identified are very informative in the understanding of their conceptual views regarding their jobs in relation to their family/marital lives. The majority of school administrators felt the development of communication and problem solving skills and greater appreciation of family were the predominant enhancers in their family/marital lives. On the other hand, the very nature of school administration which demands a great deal of time and energy is identified as the greatest stressor by most of the respondents. Stressor #2, "little time left for family," and #3, "difficulty in listening to family problems," were identified as the greatest stressors in their family lives. Thus it appears the school administrator's greatest challenge is one of balance--how to benefit from their unique training and experience while lessening the affects of stressors identified previously.

Analysis of the demographic data shows the following findings. The data indicates that school administrators residing in rural and urban areas identified similar levels of enhancers and stressors which indicates that district size and geographic setting has no significant impact on the level of stressors or enhancers of the job in relation to family/marital relationships.

Data relating to male vs. female respondents indicates some interesting differences in the manner in which family life is perceived. For example, males rated stressors #3, "difficulty listening to problems of family," #5, "personal development beyond own family," and #8, "unwillingness to acknowledge own family problems," more often than females. On the positive side, males rated enhancer #2 higher, "greater ability to prevent problems," than female respondents, and enhancer #6, "greater appreciation of family," was identified more often by females. Thus, enhancers #2 and #6 were identified showing the greatest disparity among males vs. females as pertaining to their jobs and the impact on their family.

The survey revealed that the level of spousal education does play a role in the family relationship. In the area of spousal education background, the most interesting finding was that the spouses with Ph.D. degrees rated the lowest number of stressors and also the highest number of enhancers than any other group. In addition, spouses with high school diplomas and bachelor degrees identified with the lowest number of enhancers and the highest number of stressors.

Family life among the school administrators was affected by the number of hours worked per week. The data indicates administrators working under 40 hours per week identified 50% more enhancers than stressors and those working over 60 hours a week identified only 14% more enhancers over stressors. Thus, the percentages of enhancers over stressors decreases as the hours worked increases.

An interesting factor shows that those respondents working under 40 hours per week indicated stressor #3, "difficulty listening to family problems," as a significant factor.

Contrary to the general belief that income plays an important role in family relationships, the results of the survey indicate that income has no correlation in enhancing or stressing the family/marital relationship of school administrators. An interesting factor shows that administrators earning less than $40,000 rated stressor #1, "little energy left for own family," unusually high (76.5%) and also the entire group rated enhancer #4, "development of parenting skills," high (68.4%).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This survey is the first attempt in identifying stressors and enhancers in the family/marital lives of school administrators. Since this study is exploratory and the findings are tentative, further studies should be conducted to determine if other school administrators (elementary/secondary principals) identify the same job enhancers and stressors as school district administrators. Further studies in this area are needed to enhance the ability of school administrators to expand and utilize their training to increase the quality and stability of their marital and family lives, while reducing the stressors that might have a negative impact on the marriage and family relationships. Because little knowledge has been collected in this area, it does not diminish the importance of the survey.

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